

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

MILTON ELLIOTT LEWIS III,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 1:22-cv-1218

v.

Honorable Ray Kent

HEIDI WASHINGTON et al.,

Defendants.

OPINION

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Plaintiff has been granted leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (ECF No. 5.) Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(c) and Rule 73 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Plaintiff consented to proceed in all matters in this action under the jurisdiction of a United States magistrate judge. (ECF No. 6.)

This case is presently before the Court for preliminary review under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996) (PLRA), pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court is required to conduct this initial review prior to the service of the complaint. *See In re Prison Litig. Reform Act*, 105 F.3d 1131, 1131, 1134 (6th Cir. 1997); *McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 604–05 (6th Cir. 1997). Service of the complaint on the named defendants is of particular significance in defining a putative defendant’s relationship to the proceedings.

“An individual or entity named as a defendant is not obliged to engage in litigation unless notified of the action, and brought under a court’s authority, by formal process.” *Murphy Bros. v. Michetti Pipe Stringing, Inc.*, 526 U.S. 344, 347 (1999). “Service of process, under longstanding

tradition in our system of justice, is fundamental to any procedural imposition on a named defendant.” *Id.* at 350. “[O]ne becomes a party officially, and is required to take action in that capacity, only upon service of a summons or other authority-asserting measure stating the time within which the party served must appear and defend.” *Id.* (citations omitted). That is, “[u]nless a named defendant agrees to waive service, the summons continues to function as the *sine qua non* directing an individual or entity to participate in a civil action or forgo procedural or substantive rights.” *Id.* at 351. Therefore, the PLRA, by requiring courts to review and even resolve a plaintiff’s claims before service, creates a circumstance where there may only be one party to the proceeding—the plaintiff—at the district court level and on appeal. *See, e.g., Conway v. Fayette Cnty. Gov’t*, 212 F. App’x 418 (6th Cir. 2007) (“Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, the district court screened the complaint and dismissed it without prejudice before service was made upon any of the defendants . . . [such that] . . . only [the plaintiff] [wa]s a party to this appeal.”).

Here, Plaintiff has consented to a United States magistrate judge conducting all proceedings in this case under 28 U.S.C. § 636(c). That statute provides that “[u]pon the consent of the parties, a full-time United States magistrate judge . . . may conduct any or all proceedings . . . and order the entry of judgment in the case . . .” 28 U.S.C. § 636(c). Because the named Defendants have not yet been served, the undersigned concludes that they are not presently parties whose consent is required to permit the undersigned to conduct a preliminary review under the PLRA, in the same way they are not parties who will be served with or given notice of this opinion. *See Neals v. Norwood*, 59 F.3d 530, 532 (5th Cir. 1995) (“The record does not contain a

consent from the defendants[; h]owever, because they had not been served, they were not parties to th[e] action at the time the magistrate entered judgment.”).¹

Under the PLRA, the Court is required to dismiss any prisoner action brought under federal law if the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2), 1915A; 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must read Plaintiff’s *pro se* complaint indulgently, *see Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), and accept Plaintiff’s allegations as true, unless they are clearly irrational or wholly incredible. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992). Applying these standards, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff’s complaint for failure to state a claim.

Discussion

I. Factual Allegations

Plaintiff is presently incarcerated with the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at the Muskegon Correctional Facility (MCF) in Muskegon, Muskegon County, Michigan. The events about which he complains, however, occurred at the Michigan Reformatory (RMI) in Ionia, Ionia County, Michigan. Plaintiff sues MDOC Director Heidi Washington, as well as the following personnel at RMI: Warden Gregory Skipper, Inmate Accounting and Business Department Accounting Administrator Unknown Party, Lieutenant Unknown Rambadt, and Sergeant Unknown Plowman.

¹ *But see Coleman v. Lab. & Indus. Rev. Comm’n of Wis.*, 860 F.3d 461, 471 (7th Cir. 2017) (concluding that, when determining which parties are required to consent to proceed before a United States magistrate judge under 28 U.S.C. § 636(c), “context matters” and the context the United States Supreme Court considered in *Murphy Bros.* was nothing like the context of a screening dismissal pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c)); *Williams v. King*, 875 F.3d 500, 503–04 (9th Cir. 2017) (relying on Black’s Law Dictionary for the definition of “parties” and not addressing *Murphy Bros.*); *Burton v. Schamp*, 25 F.4th 198, 207 n.26 (3d Cir. 2022) (premising its discussion of “the term ‘parties’ solely in relation to its meaning in Section 636(c)(1), and . . . not tak[ing] an opinion on the meaning of ‘parties’ in other contexts”).

Plaintiff alleges that on May 10, 2021, he submitted a disbursement of funds form to a counselor at RMI so that he could purchase an approved master combination padlock. (ECF No. 1, PageID.3.) The disbursement was processed by RMI's Facility Accounting and Business Department, and \$5.70 was deducted from Plaintiff's inmate trust account on June 2, 2021, to pay for the padlock. (*Id.*)

Plaintiff submitted a grievance on November 15, 2021, because he still had not received the padlock. (*Id.*) On November 23, 2021, Defendant Plowman reviewed the grievance with Plaintiff "and offered a resolution which all parties were content with." (*Id.*) Specifically, Plaintiff would receive a refund for the total cost of the padlock. (*Id.*) Satisfied with this resolution, Plaintiff signed off on the grievance. (*Id.*)

A year later, however, Plaintiff still had not received the refund. (*Id.*) Plaintiff submitted another grievance about the issue. (*Id.*) Plaintiff contends that because of Defendant Plowman's "dereliction of duty," he has "suffered a great loss of personal property." (*Id.*) Specifically, Plaintiff alleges that the following items were lost: (1) a 3-pack of athletic T-shirts; (2) a 4-pack of boxers; (3) gym shoes; (4) a razor; (5) a television; (6) a sports watch; and (6) a table fan. (*Id.*) Plaintiff contends that these items "cannot be replaced for the same purchased value." (*Id.*)

Plaintiff contends that MDOC policy directs that employees "shall take reasonable precautions to safeguard the property of prisoners." (*Id.*, PageID.4.) Plaintiff claims that Defendant Rambadt "fail[ed] to ensure that the duty of his subordinates was upheld according to the MDOC policy." (*Id.*)

Based on the foregoing, the Court construes Plaintiff's complaint to assert Fourteenth Amendment due process claims premised upon the deprivation of his property, as well as state law claims for negligence and violation of MDOC policy. The Court has also construed Plaintiff's

complaint to assert a breach of contract claim premised upon the failure of the MDOC to reimburse Plaintiff for the padlock per the agreed-upon resolution. Plaintiff seeks \$100,000.00 in damages, the costs of litigation, and “a decent award[] for the suffering of not having the ability to enjoy, utilize[,] or secure [his] personal property.” (*Id.*, PageID.5.) Plaintiff also requests an “allocation of funds to be able to make whatever purchases will be required of [him] to secure [his] personal property and have the ability to replace it within reason in the event of another loss in any form.” (*Id.*)

II. Failure to State a Claim

A complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim if it fails “to give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)). While a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff’s allegations must include more than labels and conclusions. *Id.*; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (“Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.”). The court must determine whether the complaint contains “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. Although the plausibility standard is not equivalent to a “‘probability requirement,’ . . . it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully.” *Id.* at 678 (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). “[W]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged—but it has not ‘show[n]’—that the pleader is entitled to relief.” *Id.* at 679 (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)); *see also Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470–71

(6th Cir. 2010) (holding that the *Twombly/Iqbal* plausibility standard applies to dismissals of prisoner cases on initial review under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii)).

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the federal Constitution or laws and must show that the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); *Street v. Corr. Corp. of Am.*, 102 F.3d 810, 814 (6th Cir. 1996). Because § 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under § 1983 is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994).

A. Fourteenth Amendment Due Process—Deprivation of Property

As noted above, the Court has construed Plaintiff's complaint to assert Fourteenth Amendment due process claims premised upon the loss of his property. Any such claim, however, is barred by the doctrine of *Parratt v. Taylor*, 451 U.S. 527 (1981), *overruled in part by Daniels v. Williams*, 474 U.S. 327 (1986). Under *Parratt*, a person deprived of property by a “random and unauthorized act” of a state employee has no federal due process claim unless the state fails to afford an adequate post-deprivation remedy. *Parratt*, 451 U.S. at 541. If an adequate post-deprivation remedy exists, the deprivation, although real, is not “without due process of law.” *Id.* at 537. This rule applies to both negligent and intentional deprivations of property, as long as the deprivation was not done pursuant to an established state procedure. *See Hudson*, 468 U.S. at 530–36. Because Plaintiff's claim is premised upon allegedly unauthorized acts of a state official, he must plead and prove the inadequacy of state post-deprivation remedies. *See Copeland v. Machulis*, 57 F.3d 476, 479–80 (6th Cir. 1995); *Gibbs v. Hopkins*, 10 F.3d 373, 378 (6th Cir. 1993). Under settled Sixth Circuit authority, a prisoner's failure to sustain this burden requires dismissal of his § 1983 due process action. *See Brooks v. Dutton*, 751 F.2d 197 (6th Cir. 1985).

Plaintiff has not sustained his burden in this case. Plaintiff has not alleged that state post-deprivation remedies are inadequate. Michigan law authorizes actions in the Court of Claims asserting tort or contract claims “against the state or any of its departments or officers.” Mich. Comp. Laws § 600.6419(1)(a). The Sixth Circuit specifically has held that Michigan provides adequate post-deprivation remedies for deprivation of property. *See Copeland*, 57 F.3d at 480. Plaintiff does not allege any reason why a state court action would not afford him complete relief for the deprivation, either negligent or intentional, of his personal property. Accordingly, Plaintiff’s due process claims against Defendants premised upon the deprivation of his property will be dismissed.²

B. State Law Negligence, Violation of MDOC Policy, and Breach of Contract Claims

The Court has also construed Plaintiff’s complaint to assert claims of negligence, violation of MDOC policy, and breach of contract.³ Section 1983, however, does not provide redress for violations of state law. *See Pyles v. Raisor*, 60 F.3d 1211, 1215 (6th Cir. 1995); *Sweeton v. Brown*,

² Plaintiff may also be asserting a Fourteenth Amendment due process claim premised upon the deduction of \$5.70 from his inmate account and the fact that it has not yet been refunded to him. Plaintiff does have a protected property interest in his inmate trust fund account and, therefore, cannot be deprived of his funds without due process of law. *See Hampton v. Hobbs*, 106 F.3d 1281, 1287 (6th Cir. 1997). Plaintiff, however, initiated the deduction of the funds by submitting the disbursement of funds form to purchase the padlock. Although he alleges that he has not yet received the agreed-upon refund, nothing in the complaint leads the Court to infer that the deduction of funds violated due process. Instead, it appears that the failure to provide the refund sounds more in negligence rather than a due process violation. In any event, Plaintiff has failed to show how a state court action would not afford complete relief for the deprivation of both his personal property and the funds that were removed for purchase of the padlock.

³ The Sixth Circuit has consistently held that a claim for breach of contract is not cognizable under § 1983. *Kaminski v. Coulter*, 865 F.3d 339, 348 (6th Cir. 2017); *Taylor Acquisitions, L.L.C. v. City of Taylor*, 313 F. App’x 826, 832 (6th Cir. 2009). “Breach of contract is a state law issue. ‘Neither the Eighth Amendment nor any other provision of the United States Constitution provides a basis for a prisoner to recover against prison officials for breach of a contract.’” *Peltier v. Valone*, No. 2:16-CV-10209, 2016 WL 1170800, at *2 (E.D. Mich. Mar. 25, 2016) (quoting *Jordan v. Brown*, No. 1:16-CV-0001, 2016 WL 128520, at *2 (M.D. Tenn. Jan. 12, 2016)).

27 F.3d 1162, 1166 (6th Cir. 1994). With respect to claims concerning violations of MDOC policy, the only possible way a policy might enjoy constitutional protection would be through the Fourteenth Amendment's Due Process Clause. To demonstrate a due process violation, a plaintiff must prove the following elements: (1) a life, liberty, or property interest requiring protection under the Due Process Clause; and (2) a deprivation of that interest (3) without adequate process. *Women's Med. Prof'l Corp. v. Baird*, 438 F.3d 595, 611 (6th Cir. 2006). "Without a protected liberty or property interest, there can be no federal procedural due process claim." *Experimental Holdings, Inc. v. Farris*, 503 F.3d 514, 519 (6th Cir. 2007) (citing *Bd. of Regents of State Colleges v. Roth*, 408 U.S. 564, 579 (1972)). Courts, however, have routinely recognized that a prisoner does not enjoy any federal protected liberty or property interest in state procedure. *See Olim v. Wakinekona*, 461 U.S. 238, 250 (1983); *Laney v. Farley*, 501 F.3d 577, 581 n.2 (6th Cir. 2007); *Brody v. City of Mason*, 250 F.3d 432, 437 (6th Cir. 2001); *Sweeton*, 27 F.3d at 1164. Plaintiff's allegation that Defendants violated MDOC policy and procedure, therefore, fails to raise a cognizable federal constitutional claim.

Moreover, to the extent Plaintiff seeks to invoke this Court's supplemental jurisdiction over state law claims for negligence, violations of MDOC policy, and breach of contract, this Court declines to do so. Ordinarily, where a district court has exercised jurisdiction over a state law claim solely by virtue of supplemental jurisdiction and the federal claims are dismissed prior to trial, the court will dismiss the remaining state-law claims. *See Experimental Holdings, Inc. v. Farris* 503 F.3d 514, 521 (6th Cir. 2007) ("Generally, once a federal court has dismissed a plaintiff's federal law claim, it should not reach state law claims." (citing *United Mine Workers of Am. v. Gibbs*, 383 U.S. 715, 726 (1966))); *Landefeld v. Marion Gen. Hosp., Inc.*, 994 F.2d 1178, 1182 (6th Cir. 1993). In determining whether to retain supplemental jurisdiction, "[a] district court should consider the

interests of judicial economy and the avoidance of multiplicity of litigation and balance those interests against needlessly deciding state law issues.” *Landefeld*, 994 F.2d at 1182; *see also Moon v. Harrison Piping Supply*, 465 F.3d 719, 728 (6th Cir. 2006) (“Residual jurisdiction should be exercised only in cases where the interests of judicial economy and the avoidance of multiplicity of litigation outweigh our concern over needlessly deciding state law issues.” (internal quotations omitted)). Dismissal, however, remains “purely discretionary.” *Carlsbad Tech., Inc. v. HIF Bio, Inc.*, 556 U.S. 635, 639 (2009) (citing 28 U.S.C. § 1367(c)); *Orton v. Johnny’s Lunch Franchise, LLC*, 668 F.3d 843, 850 (6th Cir. 2012).

Here, the balance of the relevant considerations weighs against the continued exercise of supplemental jurisdiction. Accordingly, Plaintiff’s state law claims will be dismissed without prejudice.

Conclusion

Having conducted the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiff’s complaint will be dismissed for failure to state a claim, under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c).

The Court must next decide whether an appeal of this action would be in good faith within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3). *See McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 611 (6th Cir. 1997). Although the Court concludes that Plaintiff’s claims are properly dismissed, the Court does not conclude that any issue Plaintiff might raise on appeal would be frivolous. *Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 445 (1962). Accordingly, the Court does not certify that an appeal would not be taken in good faith. Should Plaintiff appeal this decision, the Court will assess the \$505.00 appellate filing fee pursuant to § 1915(b)(1), *see McGore*, 114 F.3d at 610–11, unless Plaintiff is barred from proceeding *in forma pauperis*, e.g., by the “three-strikes” rule of § 1915(g). If he is barred, he will be required to pay the \$505.00 appellate filing fee in one lump sum.

This is a dismissal as described by 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g).

A judgment consistent with this opinion will be entered.

Dated: January 27, 2023

/s/ Ray Kent
Ray Kent
United States Magistrate Judge